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Abstract

International agricultural communicators are facing both new opportunities and major challenges during the 1990s.

International Agricultural Communicators For The 1990s

Theodore Hutchcroft

International agricultural communicators are facing both new opportunities and major challenges during the 1990s. While agriculture is the dominant way of life in the world, farmers and their families are confronted with changing social, economic, technological, and environmental issues and shifts in official policies. The article reviews some of the anticipated conditions as well as obstacles for agricultural research and Extension systems. The author cites ways that agricultural communicators can help resolve these domestic and global issues, urging them to be good communication professionals and actively involved in international programs so they can better serve their audiences and their employing institutions.

Agriculture is a global occupation. That fact takes on greater significance in the last half of the 20th century as modern communication and transportation have brought us close to a single community—the one world of Willkie (1943) and the global village as conceived by McLuhan (1989). Government policies and farmers' decisions in Indonesia, Bolivia, Japan, and Kenya can quickly and directly affect farmers and ranchers and foresters in Conway County, Arkansas—where I live—just as in the communities where

you are. It's reciprocal, of course, for the planting intentions of American farmers and the policies of our government can just as quickly influence the plans and quality of life of farmers and their families in Costa Rica, Brazil, Nigeria, and India. Agriculture is the dominant way of life throughout the world.

Two years ago, the people of Winrock International prepared a strategic plan for the 1990s, charting a course to fulfill our institutional mission of "reducing poverty and hunger in the world through

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sustainable agricultural and rural development" (Winrock International, 1989). The exercise began by board and staff members using their collective experience and knowledge to project a view of what the world will be like during this decade.¹

The population crisis will be unabated. About two years ago, world population reached 5.0 billion. It is expected to be 6.1 billion in 2000 and 8.2 billion in 2025. The developed countries have reduced their average annual population growth to 0.6%, but developing countries average 2.0% and some are at the 4.0% level (The Hunger Project, 1985, pp. 22-56; World Resources Institute, 1988, pp. 15-17). A 3.0% annual increase doubles a country's population in a single generation.

Many people will be hungry. Most people live in poverty; they cannot afford to buy the food they need. Over 1 billion babies will be born in this decade; most will be in the developing countries that are home for 9 out of 10 of the world's people. Three-quarters of the world's poorest people will live in Asia. Many people cannot get food, even when it is plentiful, due to inefficiencies of the world's food distribution system (Trostle, 1989; World Resources Institute, 1988, pp. 51-54).

Disease and malnutrition will inhibit development. Malnutrition is a continuing dilemma as increasing agricultural productivity depends on active, healthy people. It is ironic that the world imbalance between food and population is one result of medical research that has successfully overcome major diseases like smallpox and yellow fever. The AIDS disease is threatening the people of many developing countries, especially in Africa. Large portions of the limited resources of these countries will be needed to care for those sick

with this disease, thus diverted from providing for national development (World Resources Institute, 1988, pp. 24-28).

Dramatic agricultural production increases will be less likely. Since the green revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, increases in food production have kept up with increases in population by applying new technology and bringing large areas of land into production. Few technologies are in hand for immediate and significant increases in food production (Swaminathan, 1988; Brown and Young, 1990).

Developing countries will be more urbanized. Though agriculture will remain the primary occupation, millions of rural people will migrate to the cities (Smuckler, Byrd, and Gordon, 1988, pp. 18-21). Six of the world's 10 largest cities will be in developing countries by 2000. Jobs and training are a top priority for those countries as well as our own (World Almanac, 1990).

The environment will deteriorate further. Survival is the priority for the vast majority of people in developing countries; they can give scant attention to preserving their natural resources. This situation is most serious in the world's poorest regions—eroding hillsides in Nepal, desertification in sub-Saharan Africa, and clearing the fragile lands of the Amazon basin. Of course, environmental problems are not restricted by political boundaries; the developed countries contribute to this loss, too (Smuckler, Byrd, and Gordon, 1988, pp. 19-20).

Many institutions will be unstable. The debt burden of many countries, including our own, limits the ability to provide food and to invest in research, transportation, distribution, and other needed services. Economic instability leads to

political instability and social unrest (Smuckler, Byrd, and Gordon, 1988, pp. 12-13).

Development assistance will still be needed. For the foreseeable future, agricultural development is vital for the third world and most other developing countries. Their primary needs are institution building, human resource development, new sustainable agricultural technologies, and improved policies. Their agricultural research and delivery systems must function effectively (Paarlberg, 1989). But poor countries do not have the resources to do those things by themselves; they must rely for assistance on the developed countries—United States and Canada, western Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand.

Agricultural development will not occur in isolation. Progress in agricultural productivity is tied to the rest of the economy: developing roads, raising educational levels, creating a functional credit system, and countless other components. No segment of society can advance for long without others making comparable improvements (Mosher, 1969; Wortman and Cummings, 1978, pp. 233-270).

Less U.S. money may be available for development assistance. American donors—our people and our government—probably will provide less money (in real terms) to meet the needs and opportunities of this decade. Already there is a realignment of the institutions providing development assistance services. Several U.S. universities are re-examining their commitments to third world development activities (U.S. House of Representatives, 1989; Joshi, 1985).

You may well add to that list the changes that are taking place in international aid programs—the agri-

cultural development assistance that helps developing countries to improve their farm productivity and the quality of peoples' lives. Today, most developing countries have many of the institutions and personnel in place they need for basic agricultural development. A few countries are quite advanced, such as India and Argentina; many of their scientists and Extensionists are of professional stature equal to those of North American and European campuses. But most countries are moving from a beginning to an intermediate stage. They need technical assistance, but of a different nature than has been traditional. They ask for fewer but better qualified long-term expatriate specialists. They want more short-term consultants. Becoming effective managers and administrators is their priority rather than learning the fundamentals of research and Extension. These third-world research and development organizations want collaborators rather than tutors (Havener and Doswell, 1987).

This maturing process increases the importance of communication skills and programs in the developing countries. Their leaders have learned that communication is a management tool in reaching institutional and personal goals. More technical assistance programs are concerned with communication factors, but there are fewer long-term communication specialists. In Winrock, we have just two communicators among the 60 specialists in our field staff. We are, however, receiving more requests for short-term, targeted assistance. Some of these are for training in new skills, notably the uses of computers and other electronic technology within communication programs. Others have included specialized assistance in English-language editorial services.

The rapid adoption of electronic technology in third-world countries is astounding. Many of us have worked in these countries as they have, in effect, moved in a single leap from the ox cart to the jet plane. Their agricultural research now has the potential for accuracy and innovation that meets international standards. There will soon be a time when regardless of their locality, scientists can have access to the same references and journals as their peers on developed-country campuses. Satellites and associated telecommunication systems give almost instant access across oceans and continents. From my desk, I can make direct-dial telephone calls to my colleagues in nearly all our field offices. Most of them have facsimile equipment, so we can exchange complete texts and visuals for reports, documents, and publications. This application of technology is influencing the progress of national development, as well as technical assistance services (Hutchcroft, 1990).

But it is still difficult to communicate with farmers. As technology advances, the information gap widens. Scientists in Indiana and Niger can share data and collaborate on a research project, but be unable to pass that technology to farmers a few kilometers down the road from their respective laboratories. At this level, high-tech tools do not help bridge the gap; effective technology transfer still takes many, many people spread throughout the countryside.

The high-tech electronic systems are helping do better those things already done well. By and large, we have been unable to use them to overcome our major weakness; that is, personal communication. There is a tendency to use these high-tech systems to hide our inefficiencies—

by more quickly sending more information to more people over greater distances—rather than to increase our effectiveness—by improving the quality of our messages. It is easier to produce information, so we produce more of it; we are forgetting the fundamentals of communication.

The basic element of communication is the human capacity, not the machine. These new tools take some drudgery out of the task, but the need for communication skills remains foremost.

It seems trite to repeat, but who among us even dreamed of the dramatic changes that have taken place around the world in recent months? The student demonstrations in China? The popular uprisings in eastern Europe? The great debates and struggles within the Soviet Union? Even some considered projections made at Winrock just two years ago now seem dated.

These changes—and more—concern each of us professionally and personally. They are important to the communication work within the U.S. Extension and research system just as they are to the assignments of my Winrock colleagues in overseas posts. And, they are influencing the institutions for which we work just as they are affecting how we should carry out our responsibilities.

First, let's consider the challenges confronting agricultural research and Extension institutions, and thus our profession, agricultural communication (Lee and Taylor, 1986). To cite just a few:

- There is a lack of money. Federal, state, and county treasuries are running low on funds. The dollar doesn't buy as much as in years past. New programs compete with continuing services, further reducing the resources available.

- There is no need for agricultural research; there's more food than we can use now. Research is no longer necessary in solving farmers' problems.
- Agricultural technology transfer is ineffective, failing to reach its traditional farmer-clientele or adjusting to serve new clients.
- Agriculture is part of the problem, not the solution. Farmers are major contributors to environmental degradation.

You may have others that can be cited; these illustrate the point that the American public has lost much of its regard for agriculture as a key factor of national development. Even more important is the world-wide nature of these factors; that these same objections are being faced by the international agricultural research centers that fostered the green revolution and have effectively staved off mass starvation for the last quarter century. Like American agricultural institutions, the international centers appear to be victims of their success.

Clearly, there is a communication problem. What are we as agricultural communicators doing about it? What should we be doing about it? The international centers are co-operating to improve public awareness and perceptions of their work, especially in North America, Europe, Japan, and Latin America - the primary sources of their funding. They are creating autonomous national organizations to raise public awareness and generate backing for the centers. In this country, the International Fund for Agricultural Research has been formed. The International Agricultural Research European Service is focusing its first efforts on Italy, developing a model that can be used for increasing public awareness throughout the continent. Even in

India, still thought of as a developing country, work is under way to establish a national support organization. The international agricultural research centers are planning to give public awareness training to their personnel. Opportunity lists are being compiled for the support associations and centers to identify exhibits and other public events where the agricultural research story can be told.

These activities sound much like those undertaken in many states. In this case, they are being initiated by a public awareness committee of centers' directors, heads of centers' communication units, donor-agency officials and, leaders allied groups.

How can these domestic and international communication efforts be tied together so they will be mutually beneficial? Public awareness and support for agricultural research and development are not confined by national borders. Americans buy coffee, bananas, flowers, and countless other products from farmers of other countries, just as we sell our cereals and meats around the world. The global village is now a global marketplace.

The communication program to build support for agricultural research in each state is based on the premise that this is a common, public good. Our goal should be to gain support for the research station in our state, for those of neighboring states and throughout the nation, and for those around the world. The clients, the American farmers and the American consumers, deserve our best efforts to help them understand these issues if we are to expect their continued backing.

Winrock International is promoting dialogue among the various audiences with interests in and concerns about agricultural devel-

opment in the third world. We bring together leaders of farm organizations, congressional committees, and development organizations to discuss the interrelationships between aid, trade, and U.S. farm policies, seeking opportunities for these groups to work together in the 1990s.

These workshops stimulate free and open discussion of the issues. They are the basis for Winrock's new development education series of books that are widely disseminated to decision-makers and opinion-leaders, thus greatly extending the value of the deliberations.

Personal commitment is the complement to professional service. Many ACE members have had international assignments. Others are interested in becoming more involved in international agricultural development. But where to start?

Like with many professions, it often seems hard to get into the system. International assignments tend to require previous international experience. How do you get this? Start where you are. Get involved with the international agricultural program activities of your university or agency. Get to know foreign students and other international visitors. Gain an understanding of issues and conditions in developing countries. Participate in ACE's international affairs special interest group. You may also want to become a part of international sections of other agricultural disciplines or of professional organizations such as the Society for International Development or the International Communication Association. Take courses in international agriculture, international development, development communication, even in foreign languages. Keep in touch with communicators at the international centers and with institutions such as Winrock Work

yourself "into the loop" so that when opportunities for overseas assignments come up, the decision-makers know about your interests, skills, and abilities. Maybe even more important is to be a good communication professional. Second-raters are rarely in demand, even in third world countries. Flying consultants half-way around the world costs money; the leaders of developing countries know this and demand that they get their money's worth—even when the bills are paid by a donor agency. Develop your skills and earn a reputation as a top publication editor, an outstanding designer, or a creative video producer. Your professional skills are enhanced by your international interest, not the other way around. We each develop our own network of information and contacts. The international agricultural research centers are often seeking persons for their communication units. Job announcements appear in the ACE and USDA information newsletters. Within the past year, two ACE members have been chosen for top communication posts in international centers. Both started out in Extension information, then moved into international assignments.

Winrock International has a register of nearly 3,000 specialists in agricultural and related sciences, including communications, with experience and capability to handle international assignments. It is our primary resource when seeking candidates for both short- and long-term assignments. One part of my job is to identify communicators with the technical skills and personal interest for international assignments, then to get them listed in the register. Other agencies have similar databanks; seek them out, too.

The modern era of international agricultural development is only

about a half-century old. Three or four centuries ago, colonial agents began planting botanical gardens and bringing seeds home with them. They were attracted by the strange and the exotic, and by new crops that could be developed for trade. This has changed within my lifetime to become "technical assistance." Now we are assisting people of other countries to develop their human and natural resources in ways that will improve the quality of their lives and, hopefully, also be mutually beneficial. Agriculture has been and will continue to be at the forefront of this effort because of its universal importance for food production and rural employment. International agricultural development is a new profession, especially the work in communication. It is important that those of us in U.S. agricultural communication give leadership to it. There is personal satisfaction. There can be professional rewards for effective service to farm people wherever they may be around the world.

But the skills of the 1970s and 1980s are no more sufficient for the demands of international agricultural communication in the 1990s than they are for meeting our state and national needs. Agriculture is universal, but so, too, is communication. Our challenge of the 1990s is to make best use of new opportunities to reduce poverty and hunger throughout the world through effective agricultural communication.

Endnotes

1 The projections of the factors influencing the international development climate during the 1990s were compiled by board members and staff of Winrock International. How these relate to agricultural communication is the responsibility of the author of this paper, not the

colleagues who prepared the strategy document. Another recent and important analysis of technical assistance over the past four decades and suggested guidelines for development strategy for the 1990s is "Lessons of Past Development Experience: Basis for Future Action," the report of a symposium of the Society for International Development held February 9-10, 1990, in Washington, D.C. *Compass*, No. 43, March 1990, pp. 15-24.

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